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McCormack, Sheridan LeFanu and Victorian Ireland

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W. J. McCormack. *Sheridan LeFanu and Victorian Ireland*. Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1980. pp. 279. \$38.50.

For over a hundred years, Sheridan LeFanu (1814-1873) has remained an obscure and enigmatic figure in Anglo-Irish Victorian literature. He is known exclusively as a novelist and short-story writer among the "sensational school" of Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade. Curiously, most writing about LeFanu's life and works appears in unpublished dissertations and theses. Only William Clinton Loughheed's 1961 Harvard dissertation, "Joseph Thomas Sheridan LeFanu: A Critical Biography," provides a thorough and solid account of his life in relation to his works. Now, however, W. J. McCormack offers the first published critical biography of the "Invisible Prince," as LeFanu came to be known in his last years.

McCormack's book, possessing some great merits, has some great flaws. His work, like that of Loughheed before him, relies on all of the known manuscript sources — letters, notebooks, and diaries — bearing on LeFanu's life. McCormack's book is thus very strong on LeFanu's life, but his analysis of the works in relation to that life leaves much to be desired. McCormack's central biographical statement is that LeFanu's life "might be seen as a tension between two poles — family identity and continuity, and personal isolation and self-questioning" (p. 5). McCormack is undoubtedly right here, but when he attempts to interpret LeFanu's works as an outgrowth of his experience in the ascendancy class of Victorian Ireland, he fails adequately to ascribe *meaning* to the literature. McCormack describes LeFanu's fiction thus: "Essentially the common feature of his experience and of his fictional world is the idea of a society based on non-social assumptions, an experience outwardly social but really isolated and dangerously interior." Such a biographical reading of LeFanu's works is filled with peril; and McCormack's reading of *Uncle Silas* (1864), for all of its complexity, fails to be informative about the novel's ultimate meaning.

McCormack also fails to provide significant analyses of the five stories comprising the collection *In a Glass Darkly* (1872), which he rates as second in importance to *Uncle Silas*. Curious, too, is the manner in which McCormack treats LeFanu's indebtedness to the Gothic tradition — surely the major influence on his writing. In McCormack's reading of LeFanu's major works, this aspect is superficially treated.

There are, nevertheless, merits to McCormack's presentation of LeFanu's life. He has filled in many gaps in what has been known of LeFanu's life, and his remarks about the influence of Swedenborg on LeFanu's major works are cogent and satisfying. McCormack's bibliographical labors over the LeFanu canon deserve some attention, as he ascribes two items, the short story "Spalatro" and the novella "Loved and Lost," to LeFanu on the basis of both internal and external evidence.

Taken as a whole, McCormack's book is a step forward in LeFanu studies and deserves serious attention. The book is beautifully produced with reproductions of portraits and photographs of LeFanu and his family and serves a starting point for lengthy studies of his fiction.

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